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Award Number: DAMD17-02-1-0286

TITLE: A Unique Breast Cancer Cell Model for Studying Reported  
Functions of Membrane-Localized Estrogen Receptor  $\alpha$

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REPORT DATE: April 2003

TYPE OF REPORT: Annual

PREPARED FOR: U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command  
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: Approved for Public Release;  
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20030805 062

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved OMB No. 074-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188), Washington, DC 20503				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE April 2003	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Annual (1 Apr 02 - 31 Mar 03)		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A Unique Breast Cancer Cell Model for Studying Reported Functions of Membrane-Localized Estrogen Receptor $\alpha$		5. FUNDING NUMBERS DAMD17-02-1-0286		
6. AUTHOR(S): Adrian Lee, Ph.D.				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  Baylor College of Medicine Houston, Texas 77030  E-Mail: avlee@breastcenter.tmc.edu		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012		10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER		
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. Abstract (Maximum 200 Words) (abstract should contain no proprietary or confidential information) We have recently developed a cell line system in which exogenous expression of estrogen receptor alpha (ER $\alpha$ ) in an ER $\alpha$ -negative cell line results in ER $\alpha$ -mediated signaling and proliferation. We proposed in this project to express ER $\alpha$ mutants and use this system to define ER $\alpha$ action in breast cancer. We have generated breast cancer cells lines that express ER $\alpha$ only in the cytoplasm to characterize the putative cytoplasmic (non-genomic) function of ER $\alpha$ . We have found that the cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$ can bind estrogen and is down-regulated, similar to wild-type ER $\alpha$ . However, the cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$ can't activate gene transcription (due to its inability to enter the nucleus), and also can't stimulate cell cycle progression or proliferation. Consistent with the cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$ not activating gene transcription or cell cycle progression, cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$ is not able to induce the estrogen-regulated genes cyclin D1 or IRS-1. We are now determining whether the cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$ is able to interact with cytoplasmic signaling intermediates and confer non-genomic signaling, and also whether localization of ER $\alpha$ specifically to the membrane can enhance the non-genomic actions of ER $\alpha$				
14. SUBJECT TERMS: C4-12, non-genomic estrogen receptor action, transcription, estrogen receptor alpha, breast cancer, cyclin D1, IRS-1			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 6	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT  Unlimited	

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of membrane estrogen receptor  $\alpha$  (ER $\alpha$ ) more than 20 years ago, reports on this form of ER $\alpha$  signaling have continued to be documented and have recently received increasing attention. However, this field remains very controversial with nuclear ER $\alpha$  action being studied in much greater detail and becoming much better understood. The IDEA of this proposal is to create a novel and unique model of breast cancer cells that express only cytoplasmic or membrane estrogen receptor (and not nuclear ER $\alpha$ ) and then compare and contrast ER $\alpha$  action to cells that express no ER $\alpha$  or wild-type ER $\alpha$ . We are in a unique situation to perform this, as we have recently shown for the first time that ER can be functionally expressed and regulate proliferation in an ER $\alpha$  -ve breast cancer cell line (C4-12).

## BODY

### Introduction

We have made significant progress on this project, having generated stable transfectants that express ER $\alpha$  in the cytoplasm (cER $\alpha$ ) and having performed a preliminary characterization of these cells. Specific results are detailed below in relation to the original S.O.W.

Despite the progress, we have had two major setbacks. First, the C4-12 cells that we use as a model are supposed to be ER $\alpha$ -negative (which is critical for the project); however, they often re-express ER $\alpha$  which makes interpretation of the results impossible. A problem is that we do not know why C4-12 cells are ER $\alpha$  -negative, and thus we can't control their ability to spontaneously re-express ER $\alpha$ . We have tried to grow the cells under different conditions, but this has not helped. We have carried on with the project, analyzing the cells at every time point to confirm that they are ER $\alpha$  -negative. The project is still feasible, however the progress is delayed by the continual screening and the discarding of cells which become spontaneously ER $\alpha$  -positive. We continue on using the cells as they are a unique resource; there is no other ER $\alpha$  -negative cell line in which ER $\alpha$  can be reexpressed and growth measured. Thus we will continue to work with this model and if we can find out why ER $\alpha$  is spontaneously expressed perhaps in the future we can control the ER $\alpha$  levels in this cell line.

Our second setback was the inability of our membrane-targeted ER $\alpha$  to be localized to the membrane. We expect that the localization tag, which is on the C-terminus of ER $\alpha$  is folded within the protein and inaccessible for attachment to the plasma membrane. We have therefore started to reclone the ER $\alpha$  downstream of an N-terminal myristylation tag and we will examine whether this is targeted to the membrane. Despite this setback we have continued characterization of our cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$  variant as described below.

**Task 1: To create and characterize ER $\alpha$ -negative MCF-7 cells (C4-12) that stably express GFP tagged membrane ER $\alpha$  (mER $\alpha$ ), cytoplasmic ER $\alpha$  (cER $\alpha$ ), or wild type (wtER $\alpha$ ) (Months 1-12):**

i) Stably transfect ER $\alpha$ -negative MCF-7 (C4-12) cells with GFP, GFP-wtER $\alpha$ , GFP-mER $\alpha$  and GFP-cER $\alpha$ , and select cell lines that have low and high levels of the receptor (Months 1-6).

We have stably transfected C4-12 cells with GFP, GFP-wtER $\alpha$ , and GFP-cER $\alpha$  and GFP-mER $\alpha$ . We have isolated multiple clones and using immunofluorescence microscopy shown that the cER $\alpha$  is indeed expressed in the cytoplasm (compared to wtER $\alpha$  which is mainly nuclear). GFP alone is expressed all over the cell. We have confirmed these localization results using biochemical fractionation.

A setback came when we expressed the mER $\alpha$ , which was not targeted to the membrane. We do not know why this is, but it may be due to the membrane tag being on the c-terminus of the protein and not being accessible for insertion into the plasma membrane. We have therefore altered the cloning

strategy and are cloning a myristylation tag onto the N-terminus of ER $\alpha$  to see if this is targeted to the membrane.

ii) Use biochemical fractionation and confocal microscopy to determine whether mER $\alpha$  and cER $\alpha$  are expressed only in the membrane and cytoplasm respectively, and test whether mER $\alpha$  and cER $\alpha$  are capable of binding estradiol (E2) and tamoxifen (Tam) (Months 4-8).

As stated in i), we have used confocal microscopy and biochemical fractionation to confirm that the cER $\alpha$  is only expressed in the cytoplasm, while wt-ER $\alpha$  is mainly nuclear. These techniques also indicated that the mER $\alpha$  did not target to the membrane and led us to change the strategy for cloning and targeting mER $\alpha$  to the membrane.

We have not tested directly whether cER $\alpha$  can bind E2 or tam, however an indirect measure is the ability of E2 to downregulate the receptor (which occurs after E2 binding). We found that cER $\alpha$  is degraded following E2 stimulation, suggesting in an indirect way that this receptor can bind E2. This assay however does not tell us the relative binding affinity of this receptor which can only come through ligand binding assays.

iii) Examine whether mER $\alpha$  or cER $\alpha$  associate with membrane or cytoplasmic structures (e.g. clathrin-coated pits) (Months 7-12).

Not performed.

**Task 2: To compare and contrast the effects of estrogen in C4-12-cER $\alpha$ , mER $\alpha$  and wtER $\alpha$  cells (Months 12-24):**

i) Analyze the effect of short (mins) and long-term (hours) E2 stimulation on localization, movement, and degradation of the different GFP-ER $\alpha$  variants (Months 12-16).

We have not examined localization and movement, but we have found that the cER $\alpha$  can be degraded by E2. This is an important result given that a number of groups have proposed that E2-mediated degradation of ER $\alpha$  is linked to transcription. cER $\alpha$  is a variant ER that cant activate transcription, thus the degradation of cER by E2 represents a new paradigm for E2-mediated degradation of ER. Interestingly, while wt- ER $\alpha$  is degraded by antiestrogens such as faslodex, the cER $\alpha$  is not degraded significantly by faslodex suggesting that this is a nuclear mediated event and that E2 and faslodex degradation mechanisms are distinct. We are very interested in these results and will be placing a major emphasis on trying to understand these differences as we may have created a new model for understanding degradation of ER. We are also interested if membrane localization would completely inhibit degradation.

ii) Examine whether ER-responsive genes (e.g. TGF $\alpha$ , PgR, cathepsin D, pS2, IRS-1, cyclin D1) are induced by E2 and inhibited by Tam (Months 15-20) by the different GFP-ER $\alpha$  variants.

We have found that cER $\alpha$  is incapable of inducing expression of genes such as IRS-1 and cyclin D1. This is consistent with it not being able to activate gene transcription. We are analyzing more downstream genes, and will compare these results with the mER $\alpha$  cells once they are generated.

iii) Determine whether E2 stimulation results in an increase in S-phase and cell proliferation in C4-12-cER $\alpha$  and mER $\alpha$  compared to C4-12wtER $\alpha$  (Months 18-24).

We have found that E2 stimulation is able to increase S-phase in wt- ER $\alpha$  cells, but is unable to have an effect in cER $\alpha$  cells, consistent with this variant not inducing gene transcription. This is despite

the fact that the cER $\alpha$  can clearly bind E2 and be degraded. We feel that if we can show that this receptor can mediate short term E2 responses such as activation of MAPK and Akt then this would be evidence that this short term E2 action does not lead to proliferation.

**Task 3: To determine whether previously reported short-term (minutes) E2-mediated effects are observed in C4-12-cER $\alpha$  or mER $\alpha$  cells (Months 24-36):**

i) Perform coimmunoprecipitation and colocalization to determine if mER $\alpha$  and cER $\alpha$  can bind p85 and activate PI3K (Months 24-30).

Preliminary results suggest that the cER $\alpha$  can bind p85. These results are being confirmed, and the resulting effects on pAkt measured.

ii) Examine whether E2-stimulation of C4-12-mER $\alpha$  and cER $\alpha$  cells results in mobilization of intracellular Ca<sup>2+</sup> and activation of PKC (Months 30-34).

Not performed.

iii) Determine whether E2 can induce an anti-apoptotic response in C4-12-mER $\alpha$  and cER $\alpha$  cells (Months 32-36).

Not performed.

**KEY RESEARCH ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Generation of C4-12 cells that express ER $\alpha$  only in the cytoplasm (C4-12- cER $\alpha$ ).
- Evidence that cER $\alpha$  is degraded by estrogen but not by antiestrogen

**REPORTABLE OUTCOMES**

Development of cell lines:

C4-12-GFP

C4-12-GFP-cER $\alpha$

**CONCLUSIONS**

This project will use a unique cell line model (C4-12) to test if cytoplasmic (cER $\alpha$ ) or membrane targeted ER $\alpha$  (mER $\alpha$ ) can perform signaling and mediated proliferation. This research is critical, as several recent studies have suggested that cER $\alpha$  or mER $\alpha$  is important, and pathologists only analyze nuclear ER $\alpha$ , which might misclassify a number of breast cancer patients. We have generated cell that express ER $\alpha$  only in the cytoplasm. We find that this receptor can't activate gene transcription or proliferation, despite the fact that the receptor is degraded by E2 and thus presumably can bind E2. If we can show that this receptor is able to perform the short-term effects on signal transduction that other group have shown, then this research would call into question the relevance of these other studies.

Understanding any potential role of cER $\alpha$  or mER $\alpha$  is critical for the complete understanding of estrogen action and targeting in breast cancer.

**REFERENCES**

None